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FOR FAITH AND ACTION

March 2012



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September 30, 2008.

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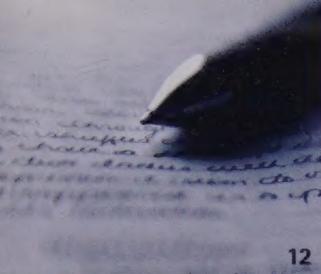
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VOLUME 25 NUMBER 2 MARCH 2012

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VOICES

Waking, Watching, and Waiting

by Kate Sprutta Elliott

A favorite prayer from *The Book of Common Prayer* begins, “Keep watch, dear Lord, with those who work, or watch, or weep this night, and give your angels charge over those who sleep.” I read it before bed to remind me that even though I may have the pleasure of rest and sleep, many others do not. It reminds me to keep them in my prayers. And certainly there have been times when I was one of those who were working, watching, or weeping at night.

You may have had nights like that too—sitting at the side of a hospital bed when someone you loved was ill or dying; lying awake at 3 a.m. thinking about a hard decision or praying for strength to face a challenge; weeping at the loss of a job or relationship. I think we all know what it’s like to wake and watch and wait.

This month is solidly in the season of Lent, a time of waking and waiting. We wake to realize how we stray from God and need forgiveness. We wait 40 days for Easter and new life that is the Resurrection. We think about Jesus’ disciples who cannot manage to stay awake with Jesus as he prays for the cup of suffering and death to pass, a cup he finally accepts—and it becomes the cup of our salvation.

In this issue, the Bible study writer explores the rising expectations about Jesus that emerge in these chapters of Mark. Patricia Lull writes, “Those who are reading Mark’s Gospel for the first time may wonder if any will be left standing at the end. In the text for this session, a fig tree is cursed and dies, merchants

are thrown out of the temple, challenges are silenced, and Jesus speaks of coming turmoil and persecutions.”

In this section from Mark, we also study the story of the widow who has little, but gives it all. In “Everything She Had,” Peter Marty writes, “Jesus would love for his disciples to look past the generous deed of a little widow putting two coins in the offering plate, noticing instead the generous person that can develop from such a beautiful act. Our widow friend gives us a preview of the kind of people Jesus wants us to be. One who has given the gift of his whole life—not pieces of it—for our sake.”

We want to be generous people, to give as Jesus gave, but we often find ourselves worried about not having enough—especially in these days of layoffs and shrinking retirement accounts. On the news we hear about disasters, violence in our neighborhoods, conflict around the world. How do we cultivate courage and hopefulness in these challenging days?

In “Finding Courage and Hope Today” Kathleen Kastilahn gives readers practical suggestions for dealing with today’s anxiety. She says that recounting family stories can give hope. She recommends reading the Bible (see Romans 8:38–39). She writes, “Remember Jesus’ direction to ‘keep alert,’ start a hope and courage journal—writing examples of brave and beautiful actions on paper in your heart.” I wish you hope and good courage in these early spring days.

Kate Sprutta Elliott is editor of *Gather*. You can contact her at gather@elca.org.



VE US THIS DAY

weights and measures

Mary Mortimore Dossin

At one point when my mother was dying, she turned to me and said, "I'm not sure my faith is strong enough." I replied, "It doesn't depend on you, Mom. It depends entirely on God's love for you, and that's the strongest thing there is."

A dear friend, a former Baptist who struggles occasionally with the Lutheran slant, said to me once that as she ages and her strength declines she worries about not being able to do as much as she used to do in service to the Lord. "I know," she said, "that it's not the things we do that keep us out of heaven, but the things we fail to do."

A man in a church we once attended earnestly begged the church council to bar from teaching Sunday school anyone who did not profess literal belief in the Jonah story.

Faith does not consist of believing hard things. Sin is not doing bad things. Serving God is not totaling up casseroles and committee assignments.

I spent a long life in the church as a master of weights and measures, very aware of all the bullet points on my ecclesiastical resume: positions held, classes taught, articles published, shut-ins visited. Like Paul, I had plenty of reasons to be proud. Like Paul, I also realized eventually that all of that counted as nothing beside the surpassing value of knowing Christ and living in God's presence.

Long-ago in a Bible study group we discussed the parable about laborers receiving the same pay regardless of how long they had worked in the field. One

person said it wasn't fair that people who had the "burden" of living as Christians for just a short time should receive the same reward as those who had carried this "burden" their whole lives. I had no immediate response, but at last I realized that living as a Christian isn't a burden to me. It is wonderful grace and gift.

Perhaps it seems like a burden if you count and measure: so many rules to follow, sins to avoid, good works to get done. But the happiest Christians I know don't live like that. They live the way Jesus did—Jesus, who gave no thought to building a resume.

The only time in Scripture that Jesus demonstrated anxiety or strain was in the Garden of Gethsemane the night before he was crucified. Facing crucifixion was bad enough. Jesus also faced bearing the sins of the world and thus suffering, briefly but terrifyingly, the abandonment by God that we deserved.

Until that time Jesus led a simple life of encountering with love the people he met each day. He did what was needed in every case. Sometimes he healed, sometimes he taught, sometimes he fed, sometimes he rebuked.

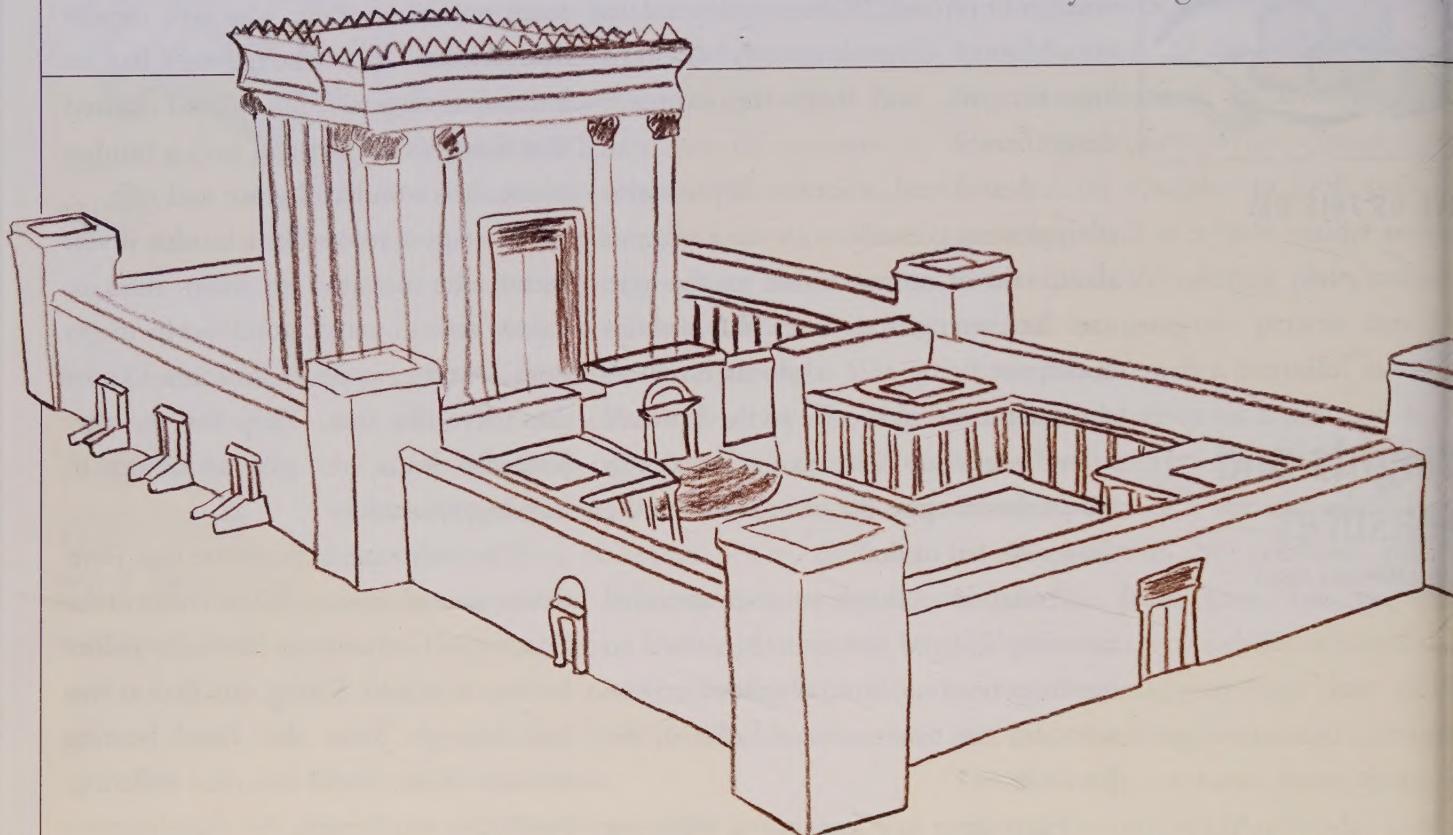
That simple life of being God's light and salt in the world is our calling also. Jesus has already paid the immeasurable, uncountable price. There is no more measuring or counting to be done. We are freed for love without limit and joy without end! ☺

Mary Mortimore Dossin and her husband, Ernie, divide their time between Chazy, N.Y., and St. Petersburg, Fla.

TEMPLE TRIALS

by Joy A. Schroeder

In this month's Bible study session Jesus enters the Temple and drives out the moneychangers.



WHAT DO WE KNOW ABOUT THE TEMPLE, AND WHY WAS IT SO SIGNIFICANT?

King Solomon built a magnificent "house for the name of the Lord" (1 Kings 5:5) on a plateau 2,400 feet above sea level. Lacking sufficient technology and materials for his ambitious project, Solomon looked north to the Phoenicians for timber and architectural help. He purchased expensive cedar wood from Lebanon, harvested by Phoenicians working alongside Israelites forced into labor (1 Kings 5:13–14). And he went into debt to the Phoenician king. Solomon hired Hiram of Tyre, a Phoenician whose mother was Israelite, as an engineer.

The Temple, completed in seven years, was dedicated around 952 B.C. Constructed of quarried stones, the Temple stood 50 feet high, 33 feet wide, and 100 feet long. Not a building for large indoor

gatherings, it was a house for God. People assembled in the courtyard. Only priests and their assistants entered the Temple.

The building had a porch, a nave (rectangular main hall), and the Holy of Holies, an inner sanctum that the high priest entered once each year. The porch featured two freestanding bronze pillars, ornately decorated. Ten golden lamps, burning continuously, illuminated the nave. There the Showbread (Bread of the Presence), the 12 cakes that were replaced each Sabbath, rested on a gold table. Priests burned incense on the nave's golden altar. Interior cedar-covered walls featured carved palms, flowers, and cherubim (creatures with eagles' wings, lion's paws, hind legs of a bull, and a human face).

The Holy of Holies, the inmost room, housed the Ark of the Covenant, a box made of fragrant acacia wood, containing tablets with the Law of Moses. Some 44 inches in length and 31 inches in height and width, the Ark was the size of a modern-day office desk. Solomon provided a gold cover, or Mercy Seat, for the Ark. Wings of two giant olivewood cherubim, overlaid with gold, formed a canopy over the Ark. Each autumn, on the Day of Atonement, the high priest entered the Holy of Holies. He sprinkled blood of a sacrificed bull and goat on the Mercy Seat and filled the room with a "cloud of incense" (Leviticus 16:13).

In the courtyard, priests performed sacrifices on a square altar with "horns" (upward protrusions) at each corner. Nearby stood the Bronze Sea, a 2,000-gallon water basin, 16 feet in diameter, supported by 12 bronze oxen. Smaller basins on wheeled carts transported water for cleansing after the bloody sacrifices. On Passover, Pentecost, and the Feast of Tabernacles, pilgrim throngs sang psalms composed for Temple processions.

Construction and Rebuilding

Solomon's Temple stood for three-and-a-half centuries, until the Babylonian empire conquered Jerusalem. King Nebuchadnezzar looted the Temple in 597 B.C. A decade later, after an attempted revolt against Babylon, Jerusalem was destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar's army. Conquerors demolished the Temple in 586 B.C. Psalm 74:5-7 laments the wanton vandalism of soldiers who "broke the wooden trellis with axes" and "smashed its carved work" with hatchets and hammers. Thousands of Jews were transported into slavery.

Five decades later, after conquering Babylon, the Persian king Cyrus permitted Jews to return from exile and rebuild the Temple. Cyrus returned gold and silver vessels which Babylonians had plundered. (The Ark was never found.) As foundations were laid for the new temple, Jews praised God with psalms,

trumpets, and cymbals, but elderly people, remembering the first temple, wept so loudly that the sounds of joy and lamentation intermingled (Ezra 3:13). Around 515 B.C., the Second Temple was dedicated. This modest structure never compared to the glory of Solomon's Temple.

Another superpower arose. Alexander the Great (356-323 B.C.), a Macedonian, gained control of Judea. Alexander's successors tried to "Hellenize" Jerusalem, making its inhabitants adopt Greek culture. One ruler, Antiochus IV, ruthlessly punished Jews who obeyed their dietary and circumcision laws. He desecrated the Temple with statues of Greek gods. A Jewish hero, Judas Maccabeus, led a rebellion and recaptured the Temple in 164 B.C. Jews purified the Temple, destroyed the statues, and replaced the altar that had been defiled by pagan sacrifices. They rekindled the lights on the Temple's great candelabrum (probably a seven-branched Menorah), and celebrated for eight days. The Festival of Dedication (Hanukkah) commemorates these events.

Herod's Building Project

After a period of independence, Jerusalem was conquered once again, this time by Romans, in 63 B.C. Rome's puppet king, Herod the Great, ruled Judea from 37 B.C. to 4 B.C. Herod was not of Jewish descent but his family converted to Judaism. Herod was unpopular and brutal. Renovating the Temple was part of Herod's public relations campaign to win Jewish favor. Work began in 19 B.C. and continued many years. The Temple complex was expanded and rebuilt in Roman style. The term "Second Temple," referring to the structure built by Jews returning from Babylon, is usually applied to Herod's reconstruction as well.

Though the Temple itself had modest proportions, the entire compound was the largest temple complex in the ancient world. White marble exterior walls trimmed with gold glistened in the sun. Josephus,

an ancient Jewish writer, said that from a distance it resembled a snow-capped mountain.

The plan of the Temple building was similar to the original, with a porch, nave, and Holy of Holies. On the Day of Atonement, the high priest, dressed in white linen, entered the Holy of Holies to burn incense and sprinkle animal blood in the place where the Mercy Seat had once rested. Whenever the Holy of Holies needed maintenance, workmen priests descended from the ceiling in three-sided baskets. Looking outward toward the wall, they did not gaze upon the sanctuary's interior.

Each week 300 priests performed temple duties assigned by lot. Levites assisted. Daily work included clearing ashes from the previous day's sacrifices, washing the altar, preparing sacrificial fires, sacrificing animals, and burning incense in the nave. A priest trumpeted the beginning and end of every Sabbath.

Herod's additions included retaining walls and various buildings, constructed of tan-colored limestone. Some giant rectangular hewn stones were six feet high and 30 feet long. No wonder Jesus' disciples exclaimed: "Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings" (Mark 13:1). Around the complex's perimeter, covered walkways offered shelter from sun and rain. The Royal Stoa, a beautiful hall supported by four rows of columns, was probably the site of the marketplace where merchants sold sacrificial animals. There money-changers converted foreign currency into shekel coins for monetary offerings.

On festivals, pilgrim multitudes entered the Temple complex via monumental staircases. The Bible says Jesus traveled to Jerusalem for Passover, the Feast of Tabernacles, and the Festival of Dedication (John 2:13–25; 7:10–13; 10:22). Curious Gentiles visited the exterior courtyard. A large inner court was open to Jews of either gender. The much smaller Court of the Israelites was reserved for Jewish men. Only priests were permitted into the Court of the Priests, near the altar.

Jews had mixed feelings about Herod's reconstruction. The Temple, the center of Jewish worship, contained reminders of Roman domination. Herod erected a golden eagle—a Roman symbol—at the Temple's entrance. Pious Jews, later executed for their actions, destroyed the eagle when they heard a (premature) report of Herod's death. At the northwest corner, a fortress garrisoned Roman troops and overlooked the Temple precincts.

The Fall of Jerusalem

In 66 A.D., many Jews rebelled against Rome. The Temple became a citadel and battleground for Jewish resistance. In 70 A.D., the empire took revenge. Roman soldiers invaded the Temple, slaughtered its occupants, set fire to wooden beams, and piled burning brush into the stone buildings. Limestone crumbles at high temperatures. Buildings collapsed. Roman soldiers cast down remaining stones. The Temple was in rubble.

Most of what remains of Herod's Temple is the platform's retaining wall. Lower layers of the Western Wall (the so-called "Wailing Wall") contain enormous stone blocks characteristic of Herod's construction. Smaller stones in the wall's upper layers come from 19th-century rebuilding efforts. Today, at the Western Wall, a prayer plaza is divided into sections so men and women can pray separately, in accordance with the custom of many Jews.

As we have seen, the Temple's history is intertwined with the story of the times Jerusalem was invaded and controlled by different rulers. It is also the story of Jewish religious adaptation to crisis. Until its destruction, the Temple was a place of sacrifice, prayer, and pilgrimage. Though sacrifices are no longer offered there, it remains a place for pilgrims to gather and pray. 

The Rev. Dr. Joy A. Schroeder, an ELCA pastor, teaches church history at Trinity Lutheran Seminary and Capital University.

THIS EASTER GO BIGGER THAN THE BUNNY!

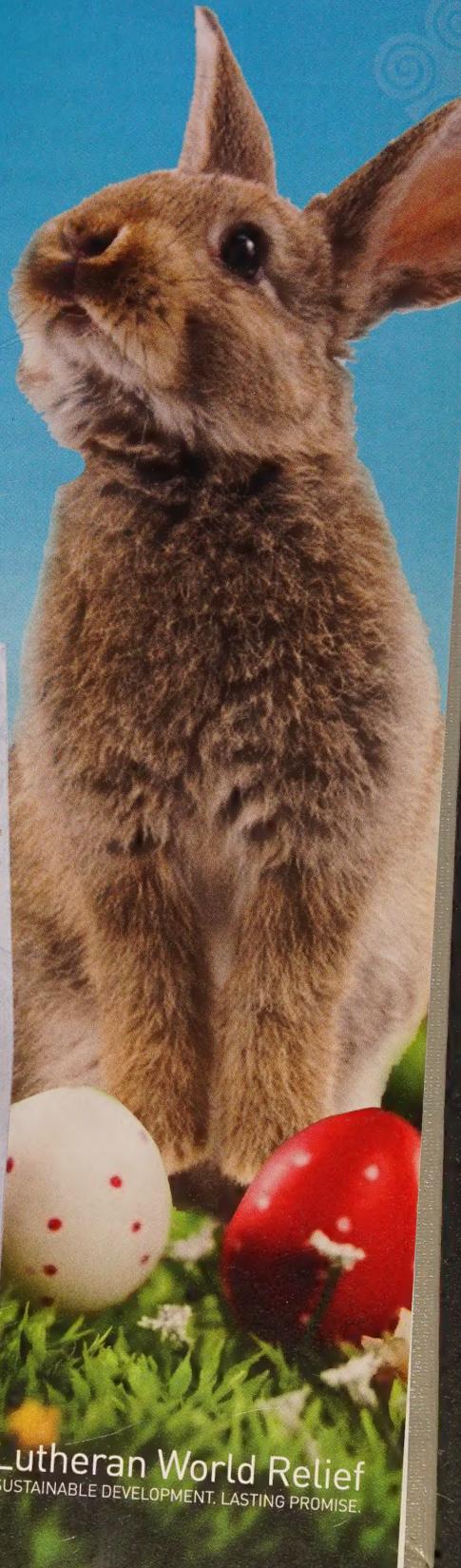
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FAMILY MATTERS

Calendar Night

by Elyse Nelson Winger

The table is set: Vases of cut flowers, plates of cookies, trays of cream and sugar, and glasses of water grace this immense oval of mahogany. Two dozen leather chairs flank the table, and more seats dot the periphery, interrupted only by flags, a fireplace, bookcases, and a spot for the press.

The setting suggests power and privilege, and it should, for this is the Cabinet Room of the White House, where presidents meet with cabinet members and Congress, leaders of nations and the National Security Council. Around this table, diplomacy and discussion are on display. Words are carefully exchanged. Smiles are strategically offered. And negotiations over everything from budgets to borders ensue.

Halfway across the country, another table is set though perhaps with less flair. In season, a vase of cut garden roses adorns the secondhand table, and there may be bowls of ice cream or glasses of red wine atop the rectangle of walnut. More often, a corner of the table must be cleared of schoolwork and mail, and room made for the iPhone and laptop, for negotiations are about to begin. It's calendar night, that night of negotiations that makes all the difference in our marriage and family life.

Stewart and I meet in the cabinet room of our yellow house, heads of the household primed for conversation and compromise. Turns out, we are not alone. There are homespun cabinet rooms all across the country, as evidenced by *The Shriver Report*, published in 2009:

"Both men and women say they are negotiating more than earlier generations about the rules of relationships, work and family—a clear sign that the battle of the sexes has given way to a new era of gender diplomacy and mutual discussion about their increasingly harried and stressful lives."

Dear reader, does this sound familiar? Are you at the negotiating table with your partner? Or, do you see your adult children busy working to make relationships thrive on different terms than your own? Let me tell you what I've learned about "gender diplomacy." First, there is such a thing. There is an art to talking with one another about roles and responsibilities in family life. Now, I've never been much for *Men Are From Mars and Women Are From Venus* typologies. I've suspected them as stereotypical and self-fulfilling prophecies. But,

What happens when a conversation about next week's schedule launches dramatic conflict about whose career matters more? How did tomorrow night's meeting turn into a sign that there would never again be family time? Could it have something to do with the way we were communicating, and the actual vocabulary we were employing?

By trial and error, Stewart and I have learned this: Grammar matters. For example: "You need to pick up Catherine by 5 p.m. next Thursday so she can get back to school for basketball practice." "Why don't you catch the Blue Line and then drive her back?" While sounding perfectly reasonable to this Type A

mother and wife, this resounds oddly for a Type-B-ish father and husband. To Stewart, sentences that start with "You need..." really don't. What he hears is command and control. A better start goes like this: "What's your schedule like next Thursday? (Pause diplomatically for response.) Would you be available by to pick Catherine up?"

I admit I don't fully get it (I guess I am from another planet), but these tweaks make a difference. I've had to learn the art of negotiation, and so has Stewart.

Our lives as parents and professionals are complex and busy. By

the time we get to calendar night, we can both feel spent and stressed. How do we divvy up the coming weekend when I have a sermon to write, Stewart has a stack of papers to grade, the kids have sports and birthday parties galore, and the house looks like a disaster? It can be done—with some family time to spare—when we take time for the art of diplomacy, working to communicate in ways that confirm that we are on each other's sides, that we're in this together, and that each of us matters.

In his *Letters to a Young Poet*, Rainer Maria Rilke writes this: "For one human being to love another: that is perhaps the most difficult of all our tasks, the ultimate, the last test and proof, the work for which all other work is but preparation. For this reason young people, who

are beginners in everything, cannot yet know love: they have to learn it."

I've been reading portions of Rilke's letters since I was a senior in high school, and at that time, I doubted his conviction. Of course young people could know love! I was busy falling in and out of it year after year!

After a decade-plus of marriage, though, I know Rilke was right. I

loved my husband when we married, but my love then was a fraction of the fidelity I now feel.

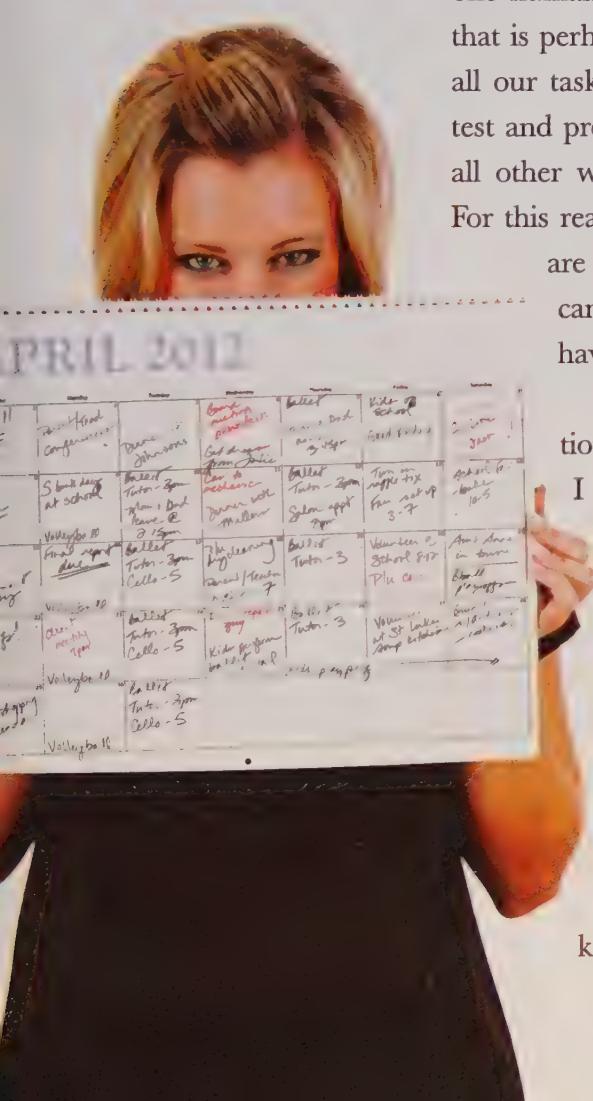
Keep in mind, it didn't just happen. It has been learned as we walked together out of one country and into another, into parenthood and professions, and through undeserved blessing and unexpected tragedy.

And it has been honed in the makeshift cabinet room of our yellow house, for after the iPhone is tapped and the calendar marked, Stewart and I can marvel at the gifts of purpose-full lives.

Our children are blessed to have opportunities to play instruments and sports, join the school circus, and enjoy their friends. As parents, we are blessed to have meaningful work that enlivens (if also exhausts) us.

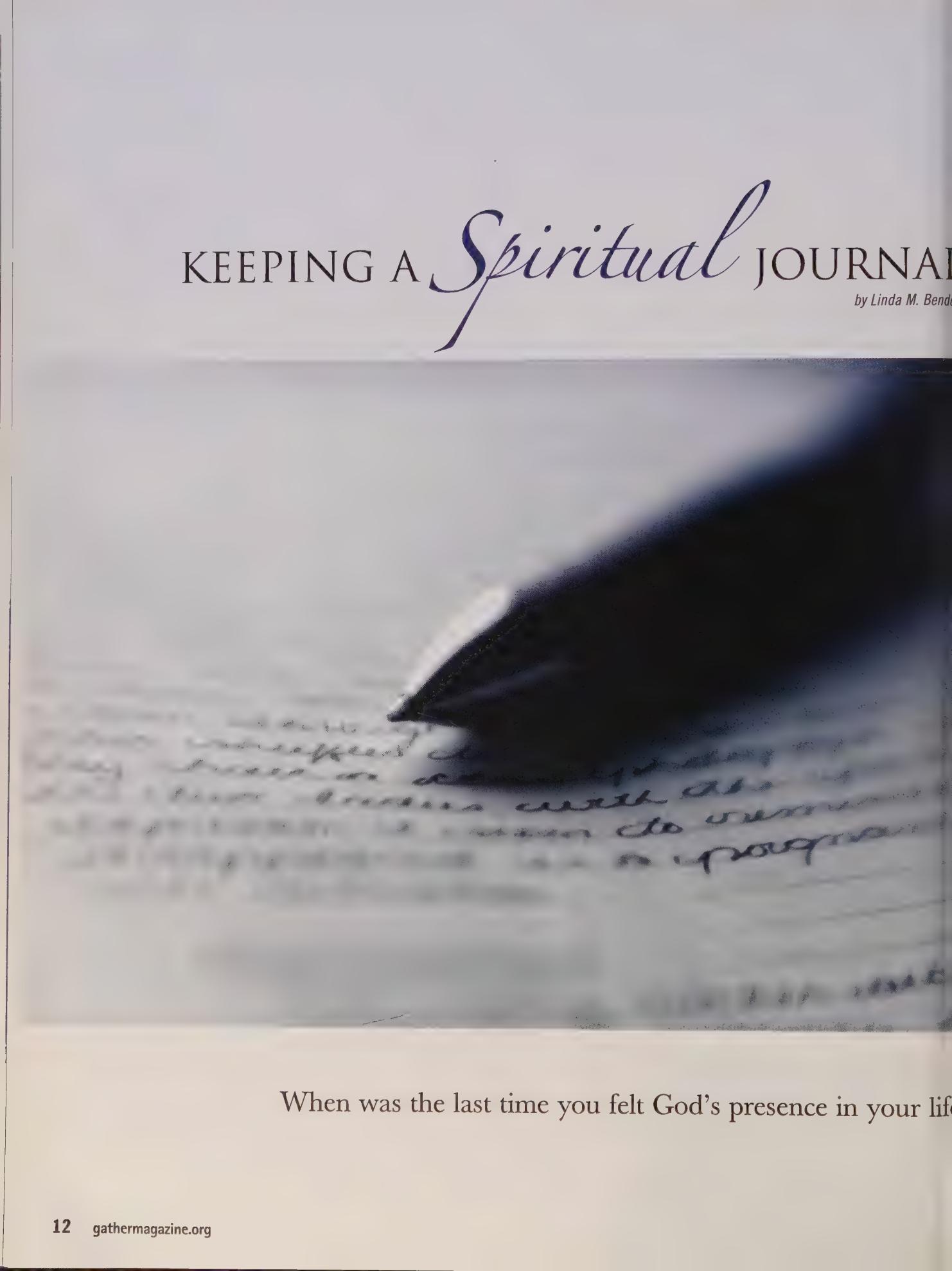
As individuals, each of us is blessed to have a partner who makes room for the other to work and develop, even as we parent and share life together. We can work at living out the vows we once made, trusting in their power to define a marriage of mutuality and love, trusting in the One who is present through it all. ■

The Rev. Elyse Nelson Winger is university chaplain at Illinois Wesleyan University in Bloomington, Ill. She and husband, Stewart, have two children, Catherine and Daniel, who are in the dental/oral surgery school years.



KEEPING A *Spiritual* JOURNAL

by Linda M. Bender



When was the last time you felt God's presence in your life?

heard God's message of love and renewal? People experience God in many different ways: by praying, reading Scripture, singing hymns, walking labyrinths, or giving service for others.

You can feel God's presence more fully by keeping a spiritual journal. The tools are easy to come by: a sturdy notebook, a favorite pen, a quiet place. But you must also have a willingness to peel back the layers of our life and be open to God.

"God wants to surprise you with the beauty of your own life, growing and alive, filled with movement, light and shadow," Helen Cepero writes in *Journaling as a Spiritual Practice: Encountering God through Attentive Writing*.

"But what if I can't write?" you ask. "What if I don't like to write? Or what if I feel blocked?" As a writing workshop facilitator, I've heard those words from hundreds of people over the years. These same people discover that personal writing invites them to be at home on the page. The healing and wholeness we gain from writing down our spiritual thoughts helps us to embrace God's gift of renewal. Connecting with God is possible, but the competition—daily obligations, distractions, fears, even our own inner chatter—makes it tough.

Keeping a spiritual journal encourages writing with depth; the journaling process offers transformative power.

Our journals invite us to become more aware of, more receptive to, and more grateful for the hand of God at work in our lives. Lent would be an excellent time to rekindle or begin the practice of keeping a spiritual journal.

THE BENEFITS

At the University of Iowa Writing Festival where I have taught for 22 years, participants taking my personal essay workshops attended to improve their writing. Many times, they told me how cathartic it was to explore their lives through writing. Years later, their longing—and my own—inspired me to create a workshop on keeping a spiritual journal.

My journaling workshops draw women from varied walks and stages of life. They come to question, to unravel, and to affirm themselves. The journaling process helps satisfy their spiritual hunger and makes them more aware of God's blessings and grace. Journaling seems most beneficial for people when they are given exercises for growth, so I ask participants to monitor a personal challenge or a prayer request during the six-week workshop.

Sometimes what we most need is to express our fears, our longing, and our sadness. Inger Herbst, an 82-year-old member of Our Saviour's Lutheran Church in Arlington Heights, Ill., wrote that journaling helped her "recognize the importance of stillness, so I can feel God's presence." Herbst acknowledges the challenges she faces with aging and said spiritual journaling helps her realize how many blessings she has in this stage of her life.

One class member struggled with her brother's indifference to their elderly parents' health challenges and found writing to be "cathartic." She wrote, "The writing assignments and discussion with other class

members was a new and meaningful way to process a very difficult emotional experience. ... I ultimately found peace."

One writer found it difficult to deal with her husband's frequent hospitalizations and another was under the care of a medical specialist for chronic pain. "I complain so much," she wrote. "My husband doesn't really want to hear it anymore." While journaling was a welcome outlet, the process also helped her realize that she needed professional help. Another writer who wanted to retire wrote, "I have things I want to pursue, yet I don't want to abandon my employer." She feared that her understaffed, underfunded organization could not afford to hire a replacement. Journaling offered some measure of discernment and she eventually found peace in her decision to retire.

Spiritual journaling can remind us that we are children of a loving God who grants abundant blessings and gifts. One participant wrote, "Journaling on spiritual matters has helped me feel empowered—to feel more confident about my thoughts, beliefs, and experiences. Although I still feel I am not a good writer, this kind of writing is freeing because it doesn't matter—it is only for me."

In her book, *Writing Down Your Soul: How to Activate and Listen to the Extraordinary Voice Within*, Janet Conner says in the chapter "Why Write?" that "unexpressed negative emotions keep us stuck in our old behaviors."

When we are whole, we can more wholly give to others. The goal is to move toward clarity, understanding, and peace. While journaling is not a substitute for seeking professional care for emotional or health

concerns, it has proven health benefits. In 1999, *The Journal of the American Medical Association* released a study showing that chronic asthma and arthritis sufferers showed an almost 50 percent reduction in physical symptoms if they wrote about the stressful incidents in their lives. These might include pain and loss due to illness, injury, death of a loved one, loss of job or home.

The study showed these journaling benefits: improved cognitive functioning, decreased symptoms of asthma, arthritis, and other health conditions, strengthened immune system, and reduced stress.

EXPLORE THESE QUESTIONS IN YOUR JOURNAL:

What patterns has God fashioned into the story of your life?

What makes your life sparkle with wonder?

What bolsters your faith?

is always there, the Spirit of God will do the rest. Underhill acknowledged, "There is no place in my soul, no corner of my character, where God is not."

Recognize the same as you begin to write. Banish the inner voice that says, "Don't write *that!*" In journaling, we do not evaluate the writing or the writer. Write freely from your heart. When you are in flow, your writing will course like spring water because it will come from an inspired place within.

LET YOUR WORDS FLOW

By its very nature, journaling is private. So we lay the groundwork from the beginning of the workshop respecting everyone's need for confidentiality. "All sharing will be optional," I say from the start. "During our class, we'll discuss each week's topic by responding to such questions as 'What surprised you this week? What challenged you? What insights did you glean?'"

English theologian and writer Evelyn Underhill wrote, "If we would come to the sacred place and open ourselves to the holy presence which

In her book, *Wrestling with your Angels, A Spiritual Journey to Great Writing*, Janet O. Hagberg suggests that when we sit down to write, we should ask the Holy to guide us in our writing and take us to the places our writing bids us. "Write what's in your heart, whether it's popular or not," she says.

IMPSTART YOUR SPIRITUAL JOURNAL

ort on ideas? Maybe these prompts (suggested topics) will inspire you to write freely!

1. When have you been an instrument of peace?
2. God always has your back: "The Lord will keep you from all evil; he will keep your life. The Lord will keep your going out and your coming in from this time on and for evermore" (Psalm 121:7-8). Write about a time God had your back.
3. Briefly state a vision, prayer request, or plan for next week, next year or the next stage in your life. This might be hard, but Isaiah 40:31 gives us strength: "But those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint."

The woman in last year's workshop wrote about the peace she felt when a hospital orderly briefly held her hand. Another wrote about finding peace in a contentious family situation. Still another confronted the pain of a difficult question: "How is it," she sadly asked, "that others have become parents, yet we were not given that opportunity?"

While reading the spiritual journal entries aloud is emotional, sharing can sometimes be cathartic for both the writer and the audience.

We soon become a community of pilgrims on a sacred journey. Six weeks of grace in action reminds us that the Lord has plans for each of us. "For surely I know the plans I have for you,' says the Lord, 'plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope" (Jeremiah 29:11). Some class members share the gift of listening and generous feedback. Others willingly read snippets or excerpts of their writing. Regardless, each member honors the writer's desire to enrich her spiritual core.

When the workshop ends, I thank them for opening their hearts on the page, and for revering this time-honored, grace-filled process.

When filling out the survey at the end of the workshop, one woman said, the writing "helps me clear my head and feel less stressed. It has given me another way to process my thoughts, gain perspective, and discern direction."

I recently received an email from Gretchen, a workshop member at Our Saviour's Lutheran Church. Her husband was on dialysis and doing well, but fell and got an infection. Treatment was unsuccessful and after three weeks, he chose to abandon dialysis.

"It was such a blessing that he could make that choice. We were able to be with him until he died," she wrote. "There are so many things to think about and so many feelings I have, that journaling will be a great tool for me. Perhaps it will help me help someone else in the future."

God wants us to reclaim our spiritual core, to remember who we really are and what we are called to be and do. We are "doers of the word" (James 1:22).  Linda M. Bendorf, director of Blue Sage Writing, offers private writing tutorials, workshops, and keynote presentations. She also teaches workshops at the University of Iowa Writing Festival, including personal essay and jumpstarting creativity. She has presented *Keeping a Spiritual Journal* for various women's organizations, and for the First Presbyterian and Our Saviour's Lutheran church (OSLC), both in Arlington Heights, Ill. She is a member of OSLC.



HOPE+COURAGE

by Kathleen Kastilahn

"THERE'S A SENSE OF FEAR. PEOPLE ARE LOSING HOPE..."

*Landon Anderson, 28, part-time UPS worker,
Tampa, Fla., Chicago Tribune, Oct. 6, 2011*

hat observation pretty well sums up the attitudes of the American public whose list of woes and worries might start with keeping a paycheck coming in, then jump ahead to wondering if Medicare will be funded when they retire, then swing to fearing the continuation of the war in Afghanistan, and finally land-momentarily—on returning a phone message from the doctor about lab-test results.

Tomorrow's list will be different, but no shorter. And with the 2012 election campaign ramping up, count on more negative aspects of our common life to be emphasized...and exaggerated.

We read this month's Bible study on Mark 13:1–37 (28) and can be tempted to identify our times with those Jesus foretold to Peter, James, John, and Andrew when they were sitting together on the Mount of Olives just days before the crucifixion: "For nation will rise against nation...; there will be earthquakes in various places, there will be famines" (Mark 13:8).

Think, rather, what this sounded like to the first hearers of this gospel in about the year 70. They were gentle Christians living in Palestine, probably close enough to Jerusalem to have been affected by the war. (The beginning there four years earlier, points out biblical scholar Mark Allen Powell of Trinity Lutheran Seminary, Columbus, Ohio, in his book *The Gospels*. The destruction of the Temple would have just happened or would have happened soon. It was truly a fearsome time. Possibly the beginning of the end. If not the end of the world, at least the end of life as they knew it. And isn't that another way to name our anxiety?)

"KEEP AWAKE"

They listened and heard how Jesus then warned the disciples of personal strife: "Brother will betray brother to death...; and you will be hated by all because of my name. But the one who endures to the end will be saved" (Mark 13:12–13). And doubtless they were confounded by his talk of the "son of Man coming in the clouds" to "gather his elect" (v. 26–27). They would not know when this will happen, so Jesus repeats they must "Beware, keep alert..." (v. 33) and "Keep awake..." (v. 37).

For them and for others in centuries to come, up to today, "...Mark wants to encourage readers always to live on the edge, expecting the end to come very soon...." writes Powell in the chapter on Mark in his book *Introducing the New Testament*.

That's not what most Christians today anticipate, of course, no matter how profound their anxiety over the future. Harold Camping had few believers in his prediction of a May 21, 2011, Judgment Day despite the publicity the preacher provided on his Family Radio network and billboards. Fewer still followed his revised date of Oct. 21.

Our understanding of "end times" remains, well, not at all clear. And isn't that as it should be? Mark does tell us that Jesus said "only the Father" (v. 32) knows when. So our concerns rather are for the faithful living of *this* day—alert to the will of God and awake to the needs of neighbor.

It is helpful—even an *Ah ha!*—to note that just before Jesus and these four disciples have their talk while

resting on the Mount of Olives, Jesus had been teaching in the temple and was asked by a scribe “Which commandment is the first of all?” (Mark 12:28). His answer, “... ‘you shall love the Lord with all your heart, and with all your soul and with all your mind, and with all your strength.’ The second is this, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ ” (Mark 12:30–31).

GIFT OF GOD

So that’s what we’re called to do as we struggle through difficult times. Not hunker down and take care of “Number 1.” But love God and neighbor. And for that, we must find hope and courage. Hope is a gift of God. Breathe in, “Hope is...” and out, “in God.” That simple exercise can ground us and fill us. It’s suggested by Mary Ann and Frederic Brussat in *Spiritual Rx: Prescriptions for Living a Meaningful Life*. They define *hope* as “a positive and potent spiritual practice with the power to pull us through difficult times.” And add, “It is often discovered in unexpected places.”

They also say that “hope can be learned with practice.” And tell the necessary attitudes: “patience, an ability to tolerate delays, a willingness to let events unfold in their own time; courage, an attitude of confidence even when facing the unknown; and persistence, the determination to keep going no matter what happens.”

Those very four who sat with Jesus learned this, before their own martyrdoms. In our time we think of German Lutheran pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer who remained filled with hope and lived for others during his imprisonment in a Nazi camp—and even as he walked to his hanging. We think of Civil Rights pioneers like the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., and Rosa Parks, who persevered in realizing their dreams for justice despite tremendous threats. Who would you add as your own heroes of hope?

One new to my list is Henry Emerson Fosdick. I found him in *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* in small print used for author’s names at the bottom of hymn #705, “God of Grace and God of Glory,” which started playing in my head as I began working on this article. You might recall the words of the chorus, too: “Grant us wisdom, grant us courage for the facing of this hour... for the facing of this hour.... Grant us wisdom, grant us courage for the living of these days, for the living of these days.”

A Google search revealed that “this hour” and “these days” were 1931, when the new hymn was sung

I WOULD PLANT A TREE TODAY.

at the opening of the interdenominational Riverside Church in New York City where he was founding pastor. He’d been charged with heresy a decade earlier by his Presbyterian church for preaching that the Bible was a record of the unfolding of God’s will, not the literal word of God. He resigned. His picture also landed on the cover of *Time*. But in 1931, the country was in the Great Depression. And Hitler’s boots were stomping at rallies in Germany. Imagine how the prayer of the hymn created hope for those who sang it, particularly in the ‘30s and the World War II years.

Another WWII legacy is the admonition: “Keep Calm and Carry On.” Printed on posters in 1939 in England, it was part of the government program to bolster resolve among civilians. It was rediscovered about 10 years ago and recently crossed the Atlantic to appear on all manner of domestic goods—from throw pillows to mugs to tote bags—in rather a camp appropriation of the sentiment. It seems a bit crass, but perhaps worse if it helps people put present struggles in context and provides a chuckle, too.

LOOK TO YOUR PAST

Looking back often can be the first step in forging on

ding hope and courage from the past. Think about our own family's stories. In my living room there's a stylized drawing of a young woman with a baby girl on her knee. All I know about them is what my mother told me: The baby was the woman's 12th child, born after her husband returned from the Civil War and before he died from battlefield injuries within the year. My mother remembered that baby as her own grandmother, an old woman in a rocker. All my mother knew for sure was that the young widow had managed to raise her family. It's enough. I look her in the eye and take courage.

What survival stories are part of your family's history? Share them. Or swap your stories with those of others. Talk, too, about those times when hope pulled you through difficulties. Conversations like these can change an atmosphere of anxiety to one of possibility, even confidence.

This can be a time, too, to bring out your Bibles and read the verses you go back to when fearful, when needing assurance. You might find that talking about why certain passages are so meaningful to you gives strength and comfort to someone else—and, in turn, you receive new insights.

My own touchstone is from Paul: "For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rule, nor things past, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, shall be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 8:38–39).

RITE TO REMEMBER

Remembering Jesus' direction to "keep alert," start a hope and courage journal—writing examples of brave and beautiful actions on paper or in your heart. I think of two recent entries in my own. (See "Keeping a Spiritual Journal" on p. 12 in this issue.)

We attended a "blessing of the animals" service in the fall at a 160-year-old country church, Primrose

WORK WITH MUSLIMS

TOWARD PEACE

by Carol Schersten LaHurd

The end-times images in Mark 13 are indeed frightening: beatings and persecution, buildings thrown down, wars and rumors of wars. No wonder pundits and preachers link such images to terrorist acts and see a "clash of civilizations" between the Muslim world and the secular/Christian west. But as one privileged to have studied Islam and to have lived twice in Muslim countries (Syria and Yemen), I take hope in the first-hand knowledge that the huge majority of Muslims worldwide condemn the use of violence for political and military ends.

A recent Pew Research Center study concludes: "Ten years after 9/11, U.S. Muslims continue to reject extremism by large margins" (August 2011). Certainly our country does need to be watchful and "keep awake" to the possibility of extremist attacks.

But even more, we Christians need to believe the good news that God embraces all of creation—and believe that we can join with religious others, including Muslims, in the service of mutual understanding and global peace. More concretely, living with hope and courage means taking such actions as:

- > educating ourselves about the differences between authentic religious expressions and the exploitation of religion to gain wealth, power, or strategic advantage;
- > speaking out when our own political leaders manipulate people through fear;
- > inviting religious others into our churches and homes for dialogue and friendship;
- > supporting local collaboration to meet social and economic needs.

Carol Schersten LaHurd is an adjunct professor at the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago.

PRACTICE GRATEFULNESS

TO LIVE WITH ILLNESS

by Mary C. Earle

When illness comes upon us in chronic, progressive or terminal form, we can feel so disoriented and lost. The shock of losing our healthier selves may leave us confounded and on the edge of despair. As I have lived with a chronic pancreatic condition, I have found that practicing gratefulness helps me sight the horizons of hope and courage.

This is not a Pollyanna version of either: This is hope and courage grounded in the reality of the illness itself. It requires naming what I am living with and also being intentionally, carefully aware of what has come as gift and blessing. We live in a culture that tends to see things in an either/or framework. Learning to live with hope and courage comes as we notice both/and. The gratefulness puts the dire straits of illness in a larger and beneficent context.

To practice gratefulness begin by naming specifically what you can truly be grateful for:

- > Does your doctor bring clinical skill to the situation? Give thanks.
- > Do you have medical insurance? Give thanks.
- > Does the technician readily find a vein when blood is drawn? Give thanks.

This practice begins to provide ballast for the weight of the reality of the illness. Over time, practicing gratefulness leads to hope that is founded in the good God in whom "we live and move and have our being..." (Acts 17:28). It helps to keep a gratefulness journal and to review what you have written from time to time.

Mary C. Earle is author of *Days of Grace: Meditations and Practices for Living with Illness*. She is an Episcopal priest in San Antonio, Texas (www.marycearle.org).

Lutheran, near Madison, Wis. The pastor, Nic Espe, invited four members of the group Dogs On Call to bring their animals and tell a bit about their experiences. The specially trained therapy dogs, with their owners, visit hospice rooms to bring comfort, go to libraries to give extra ears to elementary students struggling with oral reading, and stop in at university residence halls to cheer up homesick undergrads.

How did they get started? And why? A few friends, all dog people, sat around a kitchen table 10 years ago and asked: What can we do with our beloved four-footed friends? Together, how can we make a difference? Now some 90 teams of pet-and-owner make visits throughout southern Wisconsin.

Budget cuts in my town, Evanston, Ill., resulted in the shutting down of the South Branch Library, an important fixture in the neighborhood since 1917. The debates turned bitter as a different branch was spared. But after the vote, something wonderful happened.

Even as the defeated cadre packed up and vacated their space, they thought about how they could still serve the children and families (many Hispanic newcomers), the people without computers at home, the older folks who walked to the branch. With volunteer labor and staff and vigorous fund-raising efforts, they opened The Mighty Twig in a space across the street. It relies on contributions of books and cash to keep the shelves stocked and the rent paid. Books circulate on the honor system, no due dates or fines. And the place is packed with readers of all ages. No one knows how long funding will be sufficient to support this twig, but today supporters are holding strong.

Martin Luther would understand, I think. Remember the famous story about his answer when asked what he would do if the world would end tomorrow: "I would plant a tree today."

Now that's an entry for your journal. ☺

Kathleen Kastilahn lives in Evanston, Ill., where she is a member of St. Paul Lutheran Church.



LET US PRAY

The Enduring Word

Julie K. Aageson



Stories in the Bible

have been topics in this column many times. Last month, I referred to the stories of Scripture as wellsprings that accompany us throughout life. I want to share with you now a remarkable story about the Bible, a modern-day feat that speaks to the enduring beauty of Scripture including the promise in the Gospel of Mark that God's word will not pass away.

Just down the road from where I live in Minnesota, the newly completed *The Saint John's Bible* is on exhibit at the Hill Museum & Manuscript Library at Saint John's University. This illuminated, handwritten Bible was commissioned by the Benedictine Monastery at Saint John's in 1998 following several years of exploratory work with master calligrapher, Donald Jackson, senior scribe to Queen Elizabeth.

Jackson had a lifelong dream of creating an illuminated, handwritten Bible. Following a calligraphy presentation in Chicago in 1995, he discussed his dream with a Benedictine priest from Saint John's who then took Jackson's proposal to the community at the university and abbey. With a team of scribes and artists, work began on the project in 1998. The last of the seven volumes was completed one year ago this month.

The Saint John's Bible is made up of seven volumes. The version of the Bible used is the New Revised Standard Version. It was made using materials like calfskin or vellum, ancient inks, gold and silver leaf, and platinum—even the yolks

of eggs! Quill pens made from goose, turkey, and swan feathers were used for the calligraphy.

The illuminations are stunning. The calligraphy is remarkable. Together, they illustrate and interpret—yes, *illumine*—the multi-faceted stories of Scripture in different artistic styles. Readers are drawn into the texts as another way of seeing and experiencing God's word. Through pen, ink, and in drawings that are bold, *The Saint John's Bible* is an extraordinary encounter with Scripture and an enduring example of the timeless nature of the Word of God.

You can view this monumental project at www.saintjohnsbible.org. Copies of the illuminations are available for purchase as are individual copies of the seven volumes. A DVD, "The Illuminator: *The Saint John's Bible*" is also available for purchase or it can be borrowed from the Eastern North Dakota Synod Resource Center by emailing julie.aageson@elca.org.

Long after the buildings that house Saint John's University and Abbey are gone, *The Saint John's Bible* will stand as a testimony to the creative work of the artists and patrons who made it happen. But it will also stand as part of the promise made in the Gospel of Mark: that Scripture and the stories of God endure and will be part of the ongoing drama of human history forever.

Julie K. Aageson is coordinator of ELCA Resource Centers and director of the Resource Center for the Eastern North Dakota Synod. She is a member of Bethesda Lutheran Church in Moorhead, Minn.

"A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins ... [they were] everything she had, all she had to live on."

(Mark 12:41–44)

Everything She Had

Boston's Holocaust Memorial is just 100 yards from historic Faneuil Hall, and a mere 20 feet from one of the city's busier thoroughfares. Much like the experience of touring a concentration camp in Europe, everything turns suddenly quiet within the confines of this park. The hustle and bustle of street noise evaporates. Guests find themselves suddenly staring at millions of six-digit numbers.

The numbers are etched in tiny type on glass panels that comprise six glass towers rising into the sky. Each six-digit combination represents the identification tattoos inked into the forearms of Nazi camp victims. Visitors can walk on a path through the base of the towers. Looking up at the sky from the inside of each one, sightseers grasp the impact of the architect's design. These three-story columns of glass denote the chimneys of six

separate concentration camp crematoriums. There is a quote mounted on the inside wall of each glass tower, precisely at eye level. I walked through the memorial several years ago and made special note of one quote:

Ilse, a childhood friend of mine, once found a raspberry in the camp and carried it in her pocket all day to present that night to me on a leaf.

Imagine a world in which your entire possession is one raspberry, and you give it to your friend.

—Gerda Weissman Klein

I don't know if I have eaten raspberries in the same way since the day I walked through that memorial. One berry on one precious leaf. . . given away. The totality of one life, resting in the solitary palm of a hand, shared ge-



ously with another human being. Wow. Maybe an clenched fist with a gift inside is the best definition of *generosity* we'll ever know.

Poor Widow

In the day, a poor widow showed up at the temple where Jesus happened to be. She was seated at some distance from those with greater wealth who came from a different part of town. We don't know much about these others, except that some of them kept tripping over the property of their long robes. They had enough religion oozing from their pores to require hours of time just to complete a single prayer. (The tradition of confusing strength or eloquence with sincerity, when praying, is evidently as old as dirt.) Oh yes, these folks were wealthy. They put large sums of money, moistened from

the grip of their hands, into the offering plate.

As for the widow, she gave an offering that day as well. Hers came from the palm of her hand—a palm that strangely resembled the outline of a leaf. Two copper coins rested there. When she put these coins into the offering plate, it was as if she had stepped into it with her whole life—her bare feet, her modest frame, and her bowed head, all standing there inside the small offering plate.

This widow did not give according to her means, she gave beyond her means. All of our talk about percentage giving would seem nonsense to her ears, unless, of course, we were willing to talk in the realm of 100 percent giving. If two coins constituted all of her possessions, this woman had the technical option of giving one coin and withholding the other. It might have been prudent to do so. But

it also would not have been fully expressive of her life or faith. So, she chose the spiritual option. She put her whole life into the plate—both coins.

It could be that she used her offering that day not to demonstrate to God the person she was, but to begin the process of becoming the person she wanted to be. In other words, we might ask ourselves, “Does my generosity reflect the individual I am, or does it trigger the character I would like to become?” According to words in Jesus’ best known sermon, it could be the latter.

“For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also” (Matthew 6:21). Jesus does not tell us that our treasure follows the path of our hearts. Instead, he indicates that our hearts typically follow the path of our treasure. Our spirituality is shaped by what we do with our possessions. The person we become is directly related to the unclenched fists with which we let go of wealth.

The secret to this minor player in the budgetary operations of the temple is that she is free to be nothing, so that God can use her for anything. Whatever poverty her life might have contained before she gave over those two copper coins, it surely bore no comparison with the rich spiritual life she must have exhibited after their deposit.

Becoming Generous People

It would be a good idea if we would get straight the difference between a generous deed and a generous person. The two are not the same. Do you want to be a truly generous person in a deep-down spiritual sort of way? Or would you prefer to be one who simply does generous deeds? Any one among us knows how to engage an occasional spasm of kindness or a sudden act of charity. It feels good to give pieces of our lives away. But what value is there in giving morsels of life away if this generosity does not transform our lives from the inside out?

If my giving does not deeply impact my life, it’s really discretionary giving more than anything else. Discretionary giving may be great, but it hardly changes the world,

or more importantly, my life. From all we can tell, Jesus never dropped a hint that his life, death, and resurrection would (in and of themselves) change the world. He left plenty of hints that these events ought to change his followers, who, in turn, have the responsibility of changing the world.

Why is it that we find it so easy to spend money on ourselves? We barely think about such expenditure. We hardly bat an eye. We can shop in the most careful of ways for ourselves, almost without thought. Worry hardly enters the picture.

Consumer analysts suggest that nearly 50 percent of all Christmas purchases consist of things we buy for ourselves as we go looking for gifts for others.

As easy as it is to spend money on ourselves, we think long and hard about money when giving it away. It gets moist inside the perspiration of our clenched fists. We almost treat this money as if we might be wasting it frivolously, or at least spending it on less worthy and less trusting causes than ourselves. We question whether anyone else could possibly use our money as wisely as we do.

So, instead of becoming generous people, we opt for generous deeds. We load up the car with stuff for the drop-box at the Goodwill store. There we leave our leftovers for other people to cherish. We supply the church rummage sale with treasures, hoping that our Lord will not confuse our desire to show generosity with our real aim—spring cleaning of our closets. There is nothing intrinsically wrong with passing on our possessions. Good people do it all of the time. We just need to think of these donations as contributions, not sacrifices. The temple scribes in long robes put contributions into the offering, says Jesus. But contributions alone do not make generous people.

Contribution Versus Sacrifice

A chicken and a pig were walking down the street one morning, hungry after a night’s rest. They came upon a restaurant where a sign in the window read: “Ham

gs-\$5.99." This sounded to the friends like a break-bargain. The chicken said to his porcine friend, "You can provide the ham, right?" The pig nodded "Yes," and then asked the chicken, "You can provide eggs, right?" "You bet I can," was the reply. Into the restaurant, these two farm friends walked.

Once inside, the pig stopped suddenly and turned abruptly to his friend: "Wait a minute. Hold on. Something's wrong here. For you to give the eggs, that's a contribution. But for me to provide the ham, that's a sacrifice."

There is a difference between a contribution and a sacrifice. We don't swallow the idea of sacrifice very easily.

I have never heard a person say, "You know, sacrifice is one of my true spiritual gifts."

We tout all kinds of strength, character and personal giftedness. But hardly ever, do we speak of sacrifice, except when sending soldiers off to war. As pastor and author Eugene Peterson has said, in reference to the famous personality assessment tool, "It's a strange thing, but sacrifice never seems to show up on anyone's Myers-Briggs profile."

When Bill Clinton unveiled a tax increase during his first term as U.S. president, he called on Americans to sacrifice. Once presidential approval ratings dipped after the "morning after" polls, the word *sacrifice* quickly turned into *contribution*. White House press releases related to the tax hike dropped the word sacrifice. Unless we can perceive some immediate benefit to ourselves, we're usually reluctant to get very excited about the idea of sacrifice.

anything She Had

In the comic strip *For Better or For Worse*, seven-year-old Lizzie opens her piggy bank. "Look! I've got nine dollars and eleven cents to spend on Christmas." Her 13-year-old brother, Michael, is not impressed. "You can't buy some-

thing for everyone with nine dollars and eleven cents, Lizzie." "I'm gonna try," she replies.

"Well," says Michael, "they're sure gonna be cheap presents." Lizzie answers her brother with all the conviction in the world, "Nothing is cheap, Michael, if it costs all the money you have."

How true. Nothing is cheap, if it costs everything you are, everything you have. While the wealthy worshipers in the temple "put in a contribution," as St. Mark records their offering moment—the widow, in her poverty, "put in everything she had." She turned in her whole life.

There is no suggestion from Jesus that we are to replicate this woman in her 100th percentile giving.

It's hard to imagine functioning very well tomorrow if we give away every last dollar and possession we have today. Instead of making what one commentator calls a "suicidal gift" with our lives, it would seem that Jesus is trying to spark in us an imaginative way of living. It is a life that would be organized around more than tipping the Lord for services rendered, and more than making token contributions for personal blessings received.

Jesus would love for his disciples to look past the generous deed of a little widow putting two coins in the offering plate, noticing instead the generous person that can develop from such a beautiful act. Our widow friend gives us a preview of the One who has given the gift of his whole life—not pieces of it—for our sake. He is the Good Shepherd who would later say, "I lay down my life for my sheep" (John 10:15).

Every time we unclench our fistfuls of wealth, we increase the odds of being able to receive the benefits of our Lord's sacrificial love. And when we do this, we are well on the way to becoming generous people. ■■■

The Rev. Peter W. Marty is senior pastor of St. Paul Lutheran Church, Davenport, Iowa, a columnist for *The Lutheran* magazine, and author of *The Anatomy of Grace* (2008).

contributions alone
do not make
generous people

This Lenten reflection is adapted from a free resource at www.womenoftheelca.org. You can find many program resources there on a variety of topics, including a brand-new resource for Lent by Audrey Novak Riley.

LOOKING INTO THE

MIRROR

by Linda Post Bushkofsky

Sister Joan Chittister has said that “souls die from lack of reflection.” Lent is a good time for 40 days of reflection, 40 days of spiritual evaluation—an annual check-up, as it were. This resource invites you to use the Lenten season to refocus your faith life and realign your relationship with God.

Lent is about looking into the mirror. Not the mirror above the bathroom sink, and not the big mirrored doors in a hotel room that show more than you care to see. The mirror of Lent creates reflections even larger than that, for as author Annie Dillard reminds us, “how we spend our days is, of course, how we spend our lives.”

To ask questions about how we give, how we pray, and how we care for our neighbor is to hold a metaphorical mirror up to our souls. It is to lay open before God our lives, including all the things we hide from

others and from ourselves.

One of the ways we enter into this soul-searching reflection is in the extended confession of sins in the Ash Wednesday liturgy that begins the Lenten period. The presiding minister first invites us into the discipline of Lent with these or similar words:

“We begin this holy season by acknowledging our need for repentance and for God’s mercy. We are created to experience joy in communion with God, to love one another, and to live in harmony with creation. But our sinful rebellion separates us from God, our neighbors, and creation, so that we do not enjoy the life our creator intended.

“As disciples of Jesus, we are called to a discipline that contends against evil and resists whatever leads us away from love

of God and neighbor. I invite you, therefore, to the discipline of Lent—self-examination and repentance, prayer and fasting, sacrificial giving and works of love—strengthened by the gifts of word and sacrament.” (*Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, Leaders Desk Edition, p. 617)

When we take a look in the mirror, an honest and deep look in the mirror, we find that the problem is worse than we had ever imagined. Our sinful thoughts and actions permeate our entire lives. The extended Confession of Sin, beginning on page 252 of *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, reminds us that:

We have not loved God with our whole heart, and mind, and strength.
We have not loved our neighbors as ourselves.
We have not forgiven others as we have been forgiven.

have shut our ears to God's call to serve as Christ served us.

Our past unfaithfulness, pride, envy, hypocrisy, and apathy have infected our lives.

We are self-indulgent and we exploit others.

We neglect prayer and worship.

We fail to share the faith that is in us. We neglect human need and suffering.

We are indifferent to injustice and cruelty.

We have uncharitable thoughts toward our neighbors.

We exhibit prejudice and contempt

toward those who differ from us. We waste and pollute God's creation

and show little concern for those who will come after us.

This is a scathing indictment, isn't it?

Do you see yourself there? Do you see your congregational unit there?

Most of us have learned ways to cover up our shortcomings. We don't want to see them in the mirror, and we certainly don't want others seeing those shortcomings.

At Ash Wednesday and Lent call to take an honest and deep look at ourselves, to bare our souls before loving and forgiving God.

Before the extended Confession of Sin, the Ash Wednesday liturgy provides a time of silence for "reflection and self-examination." Rarely do we pause long enough at this point; if we were to truly reflect and examine ourselves in the extensive

way that the confession sets out, it would take some time, wouldn't it?

Martin Luther said in the 95 Theses that the whole life of a disciple is to be one of repentance.

How might you use the 40 days of Lent this year for extended self-examination that leads to repentance?

What would you have to say "no" to in order to say "yes" to extending your self-examination?

How would this realignment through the Lenten season help you live out the Purpose Statement of Women of the ELCA?

PERSONAL REFLECTIONS ON LENT

When I was growing up, Lent was such a long dreary season. It was like a 40-day funeral. Our congregation had mid-week Lenten services every Wednesday evening. Maybe we just had poor lighting in the nave, but I remember it being pretty dark in there. Most of the music seemed to be in minor keys. Lent felt like sort of the cod liver oil of the liturgical calendar. You knew it was good for you, you didn't like it while it was happening, and you were glad when it was over.

What do you recall of Lenten seasons when you were a child?

As a young adult, I experienced Lenten seasons very differently. Our congregation gathered for a soup supper every Wednesday before worship. We pared down our pot-

lucks to a simple meal of bread and soup, a type of fasting. We would take up an offering and give it to ministries in our community. We sometimes adopted those ministries and completed service projects for them as well. We were practicing almsgiving, sharing our gifts with those living in poverty. Our evening prayer liturgy was lyrical and poetic, no longer a mournful dirge. We were consciously following the Lenten disciplines with a renewed focus on prayer, almsgiving, fasting.

What do you recall of Lenten seasons when you were a young adult?

I'm now middle-aged, and I continue to understand more about Lent and I experience the season more fully. The gloomy penitential tone of my childhood Lent is gone. Penitence is still a part of Lent, of course, but it has been reshaped for me as 40 days of repentance and renewal. I turned "giving up" something for Lent into a realignment of my relationship with God. The Lenten disciplines help me do this. Fasting helps me see what is truly necessary in my life, reorienting myself to what is needed, not what is wanted.

How do the Lenten disciplines of giving, praying, and fasting help you realign your relationship with God? 

Linda Post Bushkofsky is executive director of Women of the ELCA.

**BIBLE STUDY****Theme Verse**

*"Heaven and earth will pass away,
but my words will not pass away."*
Mark 13:31

RISING EXPECTATIONS

by Patricia Lull

Opening Hymn

"Soon and Very Soon"

(*Evangelical Lutheran Worship* 439)

Prayer

God of Heaven and Earth, all power is yours. As we study your Word today, help us to trust that you intend good for us and for the whole creation. Stir up your Spirit in us so that all that we do praises you; for Christ's sake. Amen.

Introduction to Mark 11:1–13:37**Rising Expectations**

Those who are reading Mark's Gospel for the first time may wonder if any will be left standing at the end. In the text for this session, a fig tree is cursed and dies, merchants are thrown out of the temple, challengers are silenced, and Jesus speaks of cosmic turmoil and persecutions. Even the experienced reader can't avoid noting the strident, urgent tone of these chapters.

Some 2,000 years after Jesus entered Jerusalem in a festal procession, we find ourselves living in a time of global upheaval and cosmic turmoil. Wars, economic crises,

drought, famine, and floods are part of the daily news. We are increasingly aware of the impact of our human lifestyle on the environment.

Like the disciples in Mark's Gospel we also wonder how to read the "sign of the times." Where is God amid all these changes and hardships? What difference does Jesus' arrival in Jerusalem as God's Messiah (and his subsequent death and resurrection) make in our lives and world today?

A few years ago I came to a fresh understanding of the Palm Sunday story. I was traveling with a group from my congregation to the community of San Lucas Tolimán in Guatemala. Dozens of adults and youth from our congregation had made this very journey at the invitation of Dr. Michael Winter, a Minnesota dentist.

Dr. Miguel, as our hosts called him, had first visited San Lucas as part of a project to bring free dental care to those living in this remote area. He had returned year after year, providing care but also learning from his Mayan hosts what it means to live as a Christian in our world.

sion stirred in him to help build a dental clinic for this community and to train local men and women to serve as hygienists and dental assistants. Through his initiative, a number of young adults from San Lucas were given the necessary skills to carry forward this work.

The year before this trip—while still in his early 30s—Dr. Miguel suffered a devastating stroke, limiting both his speech and his agility. While he could no longer practice dentistry, he could (and did) serve as an ambassador, connecting Christians from Minnesota with the strong Christian community in Guatemala. This trip marked his first post-stroke trip to the community where he had done so much to bring healing and hope.

As our van entered the town, all along the road people had gathered to greet us, shooting off firecrackers in welcome and waving. The man who had “opened their cure” was returning, and their gratitude was obvious. When we arrived at the dental clinic, the stairwells were festooned with palm branches and flowers. A large sign on the roof read, “Bienvenido Dr. Miguel.”

The Jesus we encounter in this session brings hope to those who greet him along the road into Jerusalem. They have great expectations for what is about to be accomplished. Yet, in Session 8, we discovered that those rising expectations will not dominate in the coronation of an earthly king. Rather, Mark prepares us to understand how God opens our future by raising Jesus from the dead.

into the City

READ MARK 11:1-11.

Jesus has arrived on the outskirts of Jerusalem. This road from Jericho to Jerusalem is the route countless Jewish

pilgrims followed when they came to the temple for the annual festivals. Jesus has been traveling toward this day from the beginning of his ministry in Nazareth.

The scene is vivid. The fetching of the colt, the disciples’ exchange with the neighbors, and the gathering of rushes and branches to wave in greeting are all described as though we were there. Look at Zechariah 9:9 and you will see this story would have been laced with Messianic expectations for those who gathered to greet Jesus.

The word *Hosanna*, familiar to us from hymns related to Palm Sunday and the communion liturgy, is a transliteration of a Hebrew word, meaning *save now*. In Jesus’ day, it would have been part of the language used to greet pilgrims. Verses 9–10 quote Psalm 118:26, a psalm linked to such pilgrims and the importance of the temple as the center of Jewish worship and identity.

Notice, however, how quietly the scene ends. In Mark’s Gospel it is not yet the moment for the final

If Time Permits: A Cautionary Tale

READ MARK 11:12-14, 20-26.

This is an odd and troubling story. If it were the only impression we were ever given of Jesus, it would be difficult to see why people turned to him with such trust and confidence. The whole scene seems to be off-kilter.

Mark interrupts this story to describe Jesus’ actions in the temple. You will recall that this technique of pausing in the midst of the narration of one story to introduce a second scene is used by Mark to emphasize the point being made. Here, our minds are fixed on what it means to be fruitful and the consequences of not bearing fruit. These are important messages for disciples to ponder. Add to that the words Mark includes here about faith and prayer, and it is easy to see that this is about far more than one fig tree on the road into the city. Like the Jerusalem and the Temple, the fig tree may not be bearing fruit. But if one prays with faith, one aligns one’s desires with God’s will. (see *Lutheran Study Bible*, note to Mark 11:23–24, p. 1681.)

confrontation between Jesus and the religious leaders. Expectations are rising but we need to wait to see what kind of Messiah this Jesus is. Having looked around the temple area, Jesus and his followers retire for the evening.

1. Thinking back to the previous chapters of Mark's Gospel, what earlier signs have there been that Jesus has extraordinary power and a unique identity? How do those echo in the joyful cries of this crowd?
2. Have you ever been a part of a large worship experience? Have you ever traveled like a pilgrim to a festival gathering, perhaps

attending a triennial gathering of the Women of the ELCA? What did those experiences teach you about the communal dynamics of this scene?

Holy Outrage

READ MARK 11:15–19.

Can the Jesus that enters the temple and drives out the moneychangers and merchants be the same Jesus who gathered children into his arms in 10:16? It may be tempting to underplay Jesus' holy outrage and his decisive actions in this scene. Mark clearly wants us to know that Jesus' high expectations extend particularly to those who oversee the temple, the House of the Lord.

If Time Permits: By What Authority

READ MARK 11:27–33.

This is not the first time that others have questioned Jesus' authority. His decisive actions and clear speaking of God's will have cast him as the opponent of other powerful religious leaders.

Mark is interested in filling in our own understanding of Jesus and the source of his identity. The other religious leaders may question this, but the account of Jesus' baptism in chapter 1 and his transfiguration in chapter 9 have already alerted us to the source of Jesus' actions. Can't others see what we see?

Once more, Jesus turns the question back to his interrogators. They are silent because they fear the reaction of the crowd no matter which answer they give. How much longer can this tension continue?

If Time Permits: A Pointed Story

READ MARK 12:1–12.

Once again, Jesus uses a parable in his teaching. Mark has already focused our attention on the decisive events that are on the near horizon in Jerusalem. Whether Jesus set out this parable in his final days or

Mark simply inserted it here, the impact is the same. This teaching story is intended to make a point.

In first-century Palestine the images of a vineyard, tenant farmers, and an absentee owner were part of common life. Yet, many of the elements in this parable also have an allegorical tone. Those who heard Jesus would have remembered that Israel was called God's vineyard in passages like Isaiah 5. It is not hard to imagine the servants as the prophets and the vineyard owner as God.

The tenant farmers behave exactly opposite of what is expected of them as stewards of someone else's land. In fact, their behavior is self-defeating, absurd, and outrageous and causes us to wonder what kind of owner would be so patient with such wicked and violent tenants. Coming near the end of the gospel, this parable triggers additional connections with the overall narrative. We recognize the image of the "beloved son" in connection with Jesus' baptism and transfiguration.

While Jesus' opponents turn away from him after he speaks, the rising tension isn't only between Jesus and them. We, too, must wonder where we fit in this pointed story of God's judgment.

What was for sale? These merchants would have played the items needed by pilgrims for their sacrificial offerings: wine, oil, salt, or the kind of doves Jesus' family would have purchased when they visited temple with other pilgrims.

The moneychangers were present to exchange Roman and Greek coins for those minted by the Jews to use in this sacred setting.

Verse 17 quotes Isaiah 56:7 and Jeremiah 7:11. Both Old Testament prophets spoke directly of the necessity for ongoing vigilance about the temple and

the centrality of the temple both for Jews as well as seekers from all nations.

Now, the religious leaders clearly see Jesus' action as a threat. Things are coming to a head. Notice, though, that the crowd is spellbound by his teaching. Will that admiration remain or be broken in the coming days? Time will tell.

3. Recalling Jesus' words about how his followers should be servant to all in 10:43–44, how does that image of humility fit with the chastisement Jesus gives to those in charge of the temple?

If Time Permits: More Tough Questions

READ MARK 12:13–34.

This next section includes a series of provocative questions. Discussions of money, resurrection, and the greatest commandment easily hold our attention. Jesus continues here the kind of teaching about God's ways that he initiated back in Galilee.

The first question sounds like a compliment, but, as readers, we know that it is posed to discredit Jesus. Living under Roman occupation, the Jewish community had a theological and political distaste for the taxes they were obligated to pay, and Jesus' questioners clearly try to trap him between legal obligations to the emperor and moral obligations to God.

What can we carry away from Jesus' answer? He is not calling for a tax revolt, on one hand. However, his gesture of holding up the coin, and his question about the image on the coin, may cause us to remember that according to Genesis 1:26–27 we humans bear the image of God. Temporal government does not deserve our ultimate loyalty. Pay the tax, yes if you must; but do not confuse Caesar's way with God's way. With this, even his challengers are amazed.

The second question is posed by the Sadducees, a party within the leadership ranks of Judaism in

those days. The Sadducees, following earlier Hebrew tradition, did not believe that there would be a resurrection of the dead. While they pose a question about marriage and re-marriage, for which there were Jewish laws, Jesus recognizes the disingenuous nature of their probing.

Here, Jesus speaks of resurrection as a reality in God's kingdom. The biblical passages to which he refers are Deuteronomy 25:5, which concerns levirate marriage whereby one brother marries another's widow, and Exodus 3:6, where God uses the phrase "I am" to refer to himself as father of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Those who overheard this exchange may not have known what Jesus meant exactly, but those words will soon echo in their ears.

The third challenge comes from one of the scribes, similar in many ways to the rich man in 10:17–22. His is a sincere question for Jesus.

Jesus answers his question by quoting Deuteronomy 6:1–6, the great *Shema* or proclamation of Israel's faith in one God and commands the seeker for being near to God's kingdom. This testimony also contrasts how someone with the right understanding of the law differs from those who offer sacrifice without justice or concern for the poor.

Final Lessons

READ MARK 12:35–44.

The stories in this section are all connected to the Temple in Jerusalem. Mark places them together because of that common setting. Knowing that crucial events are about to unfold heightens the importance of each as a lesson for disciples.

The commentary on the Messiah and David's Son express the rising expectations on the minds of many. In verse 36 Jesus quotes Psalm 110:1 to make his point, disturbing other leaders but delighting the crowd.

Does this caution about the attitude of the scribes remind you of other passages in Mark's Gospel? Jesus pays attention to widows much as he befriended those who were broken by disease or troubling spirits. In those days widows were at the mercy of others for financial support and embodied Israel's mandate to care for those at risk. As in 11:12–14 the tone is again one of condemnation.

The final lesson in this temple trilogy is taught by a widow herself. Jesus simply observes and comments to his disciples on what he has seen. Unlike others with wealth, the widow contributes all that she has for the support of others. Though the two coins have minimal economic value, her offering exemplifies what it means to give alms to others and parallels God's generosity. Notice how fondly Jesus speaks of her actions. Her "giving all that she had" is a final lesson before we learn the measure of Jesus' own giving in coming chapters. If you are keeping a chart of disciples, be sure to add this widow. (See "Everything She Had," p. 22.)

4. How would you translate this woman's experience into contemporary terms? Can you offer examples like this in our world today?

5. Who taught you to be generous? Did they speak directly about money or did you learn by simply observing their actions? In your congregation, how do new Christians learn to be generous as God is generous?

Last Things

READ MARK 13:1–37

(IF YOU CAN'T READ ALL, READ 13:1–8, 28–37). The temple in Jerusalem stands at the very heart of Jewish religious life. Here, St. Mark asserts that the old is passing away and something new is beginning. The word translated as *birthpangs* in verse 8 emphasizes the high drama of an event that serves as the prelude to further suffering.

This temple was built after the return of the exiles from Babylon in the 6th century BC and was renovated by Herod the Great (father of Herod Antipas, the current tetrarch about two decades before Jesus' birth). It stood on the same site as Solomon's Temples. This pattern of building, destruction, and rebuilding reminds us of the volatile relationship that often existed between Israel and other nations. (See "Temple Trials," p. 6.)

We do not know whether Mark was writing after or before the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 C.E. during the Roman-Jewish war, but Mark's first readers would have been well aware that even the most cherished buildings could be toppled when enemies overtook the land.

Do you hear the distinctive tone of the language in chapter 13? This is an example of apocalyptic writing which can also be found in other books of the Bible such as Daniel and was familiar to Christians in the first century. It is characterized by a sense of impending crisis and great upheaval, a cosmic battle between good and evil, and a "before" and "after" demarcation of time.

Note that Jesus has most of this conversation with the inner circle of three (Peter, James, and John) as they sit on the Mount of Olives looking across at the city. It is a reflection they would surely remember from his final days. In this chapter are important reminders for any who wish to be close to Jesus.

In the days immediate prior to his own arrest, Jesus makes clear that his followers can anticipate their own ordeals, with grilling, suffering, and persecution. What

tters most in those circumstances is that Jesus' disciples be prepared to make their own testimony and to share the good news. Verse 10 echoes Mark 1:1. It is not only the evangelist who plays a role in witnessing to us but each generation of Christians will do likewise. This gospel narrative promises neither safety nor comfort to Jesus' followers. Instead, Christians are urged to trust the Holy Spirit's guidance, to anticipate tensions even within one's own household, and persevere. Ultimately, this is a word of hope and encouragement to those who endure. (See "Hope and Courage," p. 16.)

The cosmic images in verse 24–27 about the "end times" are drawn from Old Testament passages such as Isaiah 13:10 and Ezekiel 32:7–8. By using these familiar images, Jesus draws attention to the role he, himself, will play in God's unfolding drama. While it may be tempting to try to correlate the wars cited in 13:7 and calamities in 13:24 with contemporary events, the emphasis here is on the speaker, Jesus.

In 13:32 he cautions against such speculation. This is not a fruitful practice for disciples. The chapter ends with an urgent plea for the disciples to stay awake and alert. But they will not be waiting in a vacuum. This staying and watching is colored by a strong word of assurance. "Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away" (13:31). (See "Keeping a Spiritual Journal," p. 12.)

What might these words in chapter 13—to be alert and wakeful, cautious of false prophets, and yet hopeful of God's enduring presence—have meant to those who first heard St. Mark's Gospel?

What does it mean to live with hope and courage today?

Looking Ahead

Jesus is now in Jerusalem, the city of his destiny. We are about to see how the predictions of his suffering and death will play out and learn what meaning disciples place on the events of his last days. As our own expectations increase, we do well to remember Mark's plea to be watchful and alert, always ready to see what God is doing.

Closing Prayer

Bless the Word we have heard. May it take root in our lives and bear fruit in all we do and say. Amen. 

The Rev. Patricia Lull is executive director of the St. Paul Area Council of Churches (www.spacc.org). An ELCA pastor, she has served as a parish pastor, director of campus ministry in the ELCA, and as dean of students at Luther Seminary, St. Paul, Minn.

If Time Permits: An Open Exchange

In the digital age, news of global crisis and environmental calamity spread at lightning speed. Writing in the first century, Mark lifts up the teachings of Jesus that point to the intersection of God's plans for the world with real life events like war and phenomenal shifts in political power.

What would "a certain young man" in 14:51–52 have to say about the power of God's plans and the power of nations and empires? If you have such a conversation partner, read Mark 13:24–31 together. Talk about what it means to live with hope that is grounded in something other than the powers of this age.

8. What is your source of hope and confidence in the midst of political upheaval today and catastrophes on a global scale?



HEALTH WISE

Your Amazing Body

by Molly M. Ginty

Illustration by Jennifer L. Jackson
Photo: iStockphoto.com/Thinkstock

It wakes you up in the morning and puts you to bed at night. It feeds you, dresses you, and gets you each and every place you need to go.

It's a walking miracle. It's your body.

As spring unfolds and we start to shed our winter-weather clothes, too many of us get too fixated on the flaws that hide beneath our coats and corduroy: lumps here, bumps there, perhaps a stubborn bulge at the waist.

But have you ever stopped to consider the *wonder* that is your body, and how blessed you are that it *works* so wonderfully well? "If anything is sacred," said poet Walt Whitman, "the human body is sacred."

The body is capable of astounding feats: leaping 20 feet and 1 $\frac{3}{4}$ inches (accomplished by Ukrainian pole-vaulter Sergey Bubka in 1993); running 27.79 miles per hour (done by Jamaican sprinter Usain Bolt in 2009); and living 122 years and 164 days (a record set in 1997 by Frenchwoman Jeanne Calment, who attributed her longevity to lots of chocolate and red wine).

Just making it through last winter's flu season is an accomplishment in itself. Honed by 200,000 years of human evolution, your body has successfully overcome every illness and injury that has besieged you thus far. Steadily, quietly—and likely without much credit—your body keeps plugging away, performing feats would amaze you if you only stopped to take note of them.

Do realize that you sneeze at 100 miles per hour? That your tongue has

its own unique pattern—much like that of your fingerprints? That you can distinguish 50,000 separate scents and 100,000 different tastes?

Hold your breath (which Swiss freediver Peter Colat did in 2010 for 19 minutes and 21 seconds). Here's an A to Z list of some striking reasons to stop you rite-of-spring criticisms and instead stand in awe of your body.

AGING

Between the moment you're born (when touch is the first sense you perceive) to the moment you die (when hearing is the last sense to leave) your body undergoes countless transformations. During your lifespan (which averages 75 years for men and 80 years for women), you'll multiply your birth weight up to 40 times over. You'll go from having no teeth to having 20 baby teeth to losing all those and gaining 32 separate adult teeth again. You'll consume 30 to 50 tons of food, which your body will turn into fuel that allows your heart to beat 3 billion times and your feet to walk as far as they would if you circumnavigated the globe four times.

BONES

Though you are born with 350 bones, you have just 206 of them at the end of your life because so many of them fuse together as your body matures. Over the course of the day, your structure changes, too: the discs between your vertebrae literally settle, so you're about a quarter inch shorter in the evening than you are in the morning.

the morning. From your longest bone (the femur in the thigh) to your shortest (the rice-grain-sized stirrup bone in the ear), you're constantly

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BESTIARY

Your stomach produces a new mucus lining every four days because otherwise, it would digest itself (stomach acid can dissolve a steel razor-blade). Your intestines

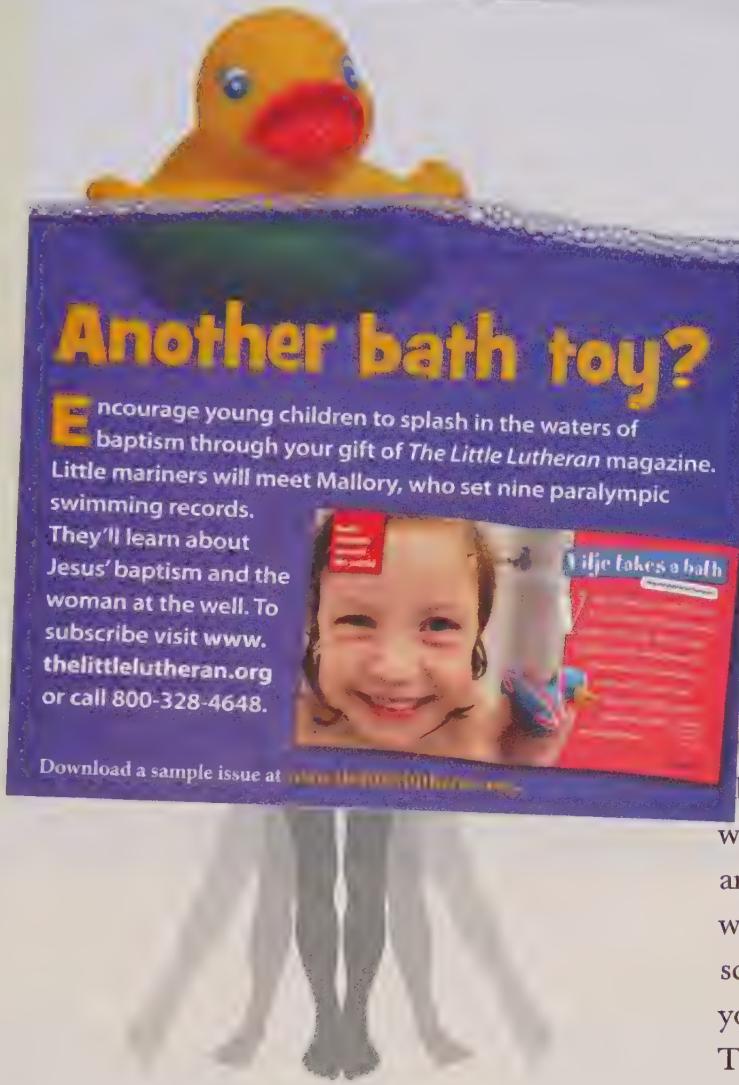
are 10 times longer than you are tall, and only fit in your abdomen because they are coiled so tightly around each other.

KIDS

Each day, you need to drink at least 8 cups of water. That's in part because you're replenishing liquid two-thirds of your brain and body

are comprised of water). It's also because you're making new fluids: 60 gallons of sweat, 96 gallons of saliva, and 132 gallons of urine per

day. The orbicularis oculi or blinking muscle in the eye, and the strongest (for its size) is the humble tongue. You use 20 muscles to smile—and to frown.



in less than a minute. The heart can squirt blood from open vessels for lengths of up to 30 feet.

MUSCLES

More than 600 muscles twist and wind their way through your body. The smallest is the stapedius in the inner ear; the largest is the gluteus maximus in the buttock, the fastest

you shed about 14 miles and 100 strands of hair. As we are regenerated, you lose about six pounds of skin and 100,000 hair follicles in spare. Manes are lushest among blondes (who boast an average 146,000 follicles), followed by people with black hair (110,000 follicles), brunettes (100,000), and redheads (86,000).

THE ZOO ON YOU

About 90 percent of your weight is your own body—and 10 percent of it is the weight of all the microscopic creatures that call your body their home. Tiny mites inhabit your eyelashes. Fungi live in your throat. Indeed, there are 32 million (most-harmless) bacteria covering each square inch of your skin. Walt Whitman said, "I contain multitudes." And it appears that we all do, too. ■
Molly M. Ginty (<http://mollymaureenginty.wordpress.com>) lives in New York City. Her work has appeared in *Women's eNews*, *Marie Claire*, *Redbook*, and *Ms.*

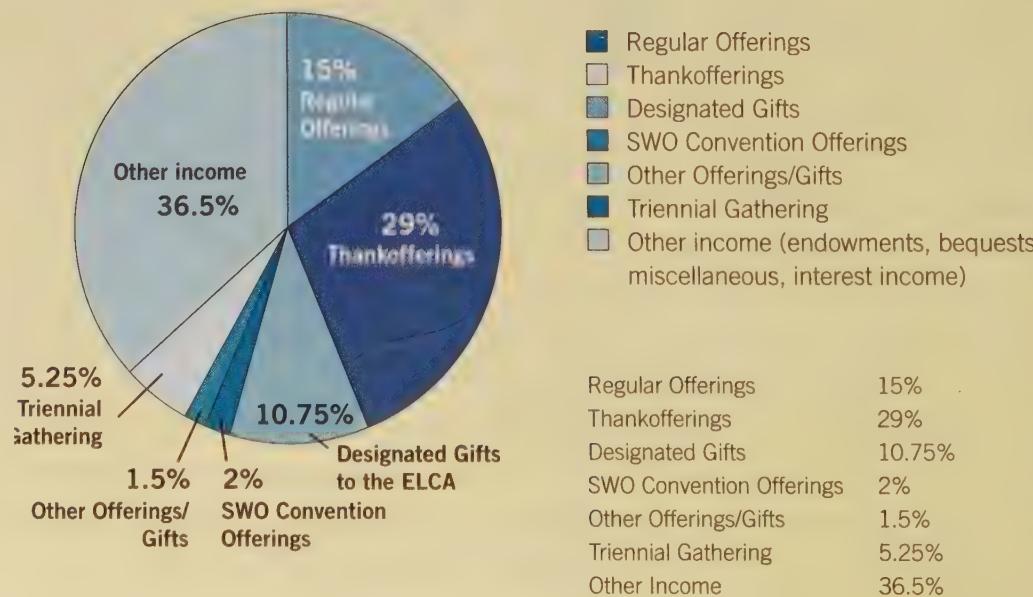
Your Gifts at Work

By Linda Ruth Gammie

Because Women of the ELCA is grounded in the redeeming and transforming love of God in Jesus Christ, our mission and ministry change lives.



2010 Revenue



Regular Offerings	15%	\$526,095
Thankofferings	29%	\$1,006,316
Designated Gifts	10.75%	\$372,477
SWO Convention Offerings	2%	\$71,566
Other Offerings/Gifts	1.5%	\$54,721
Triennial Gathering	5.25%	\$182,020
Other Income	36.5%	\$1,276,787

ough graphs and charts and numbers and pictures can barely describe those transformations, here our best effort.

As the pie chart labeled "2010 revenue" shows, the churchwide organization receives nearly all of regular annual income from two sources: (1)regular offerings that come from congregational units through their synodical organizations and (2)Thankofferings that come directly from congregational units to the churchwide organization. Synodical convention offerings

and designated gifts make up much of the remaining revenue, along with gifts of those who have provided for the organization in their wills (other income).

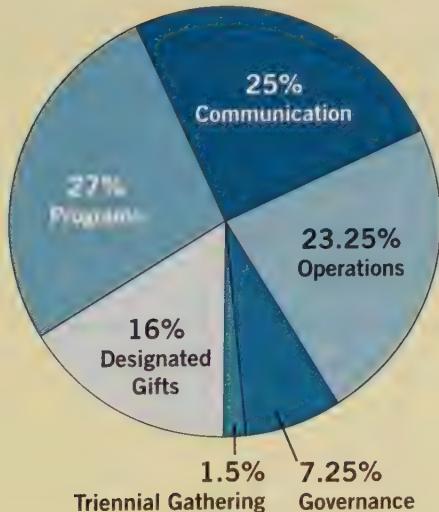
Gifts to this organization have enabled the churchwide expression of Women of the ELCA to support you and your ministries in a variety of ways. We organize our support of you and your ministries into four major areas: programs, communication, operations, and governance. The programs area (\$629,955) covers our anti-racism and cross-

cultural efforts, evangelism, global education, new program resources, stewardship and the administrative work of the grants and scholarships committees. This figure includes also the salaries and benefits of the staff that carry out this work.

The communication area (\$576,689) includes editing, graphic design, printing, mailing, resource services, our extensive Web site including social media efforts, the *Interchange* newsletter, *Bold Connections* newsletter, the e-zine *Café* and administrative costs for the



2010 Expenses



- Programs
- Communication
- Operations
- Governance
- Triennial Gathering
- Designated Gifts to the ELCA

Programs	27%	\$629,955
Communication	25%	\$576,689
Operations	23.25%	\$540,197
Governance	7.25%	\$168,460
Triennial Gathering	1.5%	\$35,094
Designated Gifts	16%	\$372,477

magazine. This figure includes the salaries and benefits of the staff who carry out this work.

The work of operations (\$540,197) includes organizational development, our annual audit, equipment, information technology costs, and other purchased ELCA services. This operations figure includes the salaries and benefits of staff carrying out both operations and the governance work of the organization. Governance expenses in 2010 were \$168,460. This includes executive board meetings, the travel of board members to synodical conventions, training for synodical treasurers, and the conference of synodical presidents.

Designated gifts (\$372,477) were gifts received in 2010 for particular funds or ministries, including Lutheran World Relief, ELCA World Hunger, disaster relief, and missionary sponsorship.

Gifts to the ministries were passed *in total* to their designated area but because they were made *through* the women's organization, we can see the important impact of women's giving on ministries of the whole church.

You may give regular offerings, Thankofferings, special offerings, or designated gifts to the women's organization. Offerings are our primary source of financial support, and they all have their own purpose. It is amazing how the offerings that we give, when added together with those of other women across the United States and Caribbean, fuel the churchwide organization to support all of us in our ministries! Thank you!

For more information on stewardship and ways to give, including our 2011–2012 Thankoffering service, information about planned giving and other stewardship program resources, visit our Web site womenoftheelca.org, following the link for "Stewardship and Giving." There you will also find our 2008–2011 Triennial Report that offers snapshot views of the ministries and programs supported by your generous gifts over the past three years. This piece is an excellent way to show what Women of the ELCA does in partnership with the women of this church and for the people in our greater communities.

The report is structured using

the words of our purpose statement illustrating how the entirety of our work is driven by and lived out through our mission and purpose. From Bible studies to global education; grant-making to intergenerational programming; anti-racism education to our award-winning e-zine for young women, these ministries are made possible by offerings given and entrusted to the churchwide women's organization. You may call the churchwide office to request a copy of any of these materials or you may download them at womenoftheelca.org.

As we begin the new year we look forward to celebrating the 25th anniversary of Women of the ELCA. The constituting convention of Women of the ELCA took place in June 1987, creating this new organization as a movement of faithful women responding to their baptismal calls. There will be many ways to celebrate this silver anniversary, but chief among them will be a 25th anniversary offering. Find complete anniversary celebration details on our Web site. ■■■

Linda Post Bushkofsky is executive director of Women of the ELCA.

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Spread the good news about Gather and the many life-changing ministries of Women of the ELCA. Order copies of the 2008–2011 Triennial Report by calling 800-638-3522 ext. 2230 or go to womenoftheelca.org to download it for free.



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Starting a book club

Did you make a New Year's resolution to read more books? Perhaps you've even been thinking about starting a book club with your friends. Women of the ELCA has a new resource, "Page Turners: Building a Book Club That Suits Your Style" that can help you with that pursuit.

The new resource helps those wanting to know more about book clubs or how to start one. It even has a section for those who like to read alone: solo readers. Contributors to the resource even suggest books that might get you started in your reading selection. Visit www.womenoftheelca.org to download the book club resource.

Perhaps your first book should be:

Leymah Gbowee's new memoir, *Mighty Be Our Powers: How Sisterhood, Prayer and Sex Changed a Nation at War*.

The 2011 Nobel Peace Prize Winner writes about being a teenager displaced by war, being a young mother trying to escape domestic violence, the beginnings of her activism in Liberia's peace movement, and her present mission working for women's peace throughout West Africa.

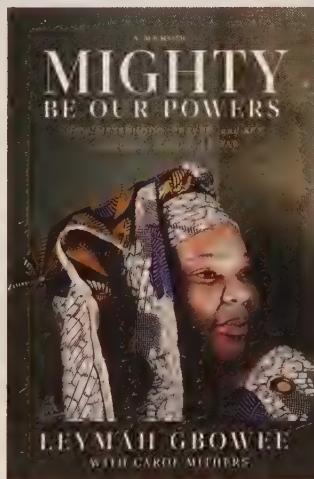
Gbowee was 17 when the war in Liberia began; she spent the first part of the war living with her family in a refugee camp in Ghana. Begging to go home to Liberia, her mother finally let her go

but Gbowee was unprepared for the horror, death, and destruction that awaited her and the toll the war was taking on the women of Monrovia.

Gbowee is a founding member of the Women in Peacebuilding Program/West African Network for Peacebuilding (WIPNET/WANEP). Her interfaith peace movement was chronicled in the documentary movie, "Pray the Devil Back to Hell." Gbowee was a keynote speaker at the Women of the ELCA triennial gathering in Spokane last summer. Find the book at www.amazon.com.

How to make pillowcase dresses

We've received a lot of calls about "that article we ran about how to make pillowcase dresses." Callers want to know how to make them and where to send them. But we've never run an article like that. So we thought we would send you to a Web site that can help.



If you are interested in making dresses from pillowcases, visit www.littledressesforafrica.org. Little Dresses for Africa is a non-profit, Christian-based organization that provides relief to the children of Africa.

On the site, you can find easy directions for making pillowcase directions. Video instructions are also available. You can send the dresses to Little Dresses for Africa or to a charity in your area.

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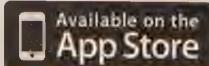
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FACE NOTES

5 Years and Counting!

Linda Post Bushkofsky



For more information, visit
www.womenoftheelca.org.

Today my alma mater has a women's studies program, but when I started college there was nothing like that. Gender analysis? Feminist scholarship? The closest thing we had was celebration of the new Women's History Week. It was pretty radical back then to lift up women's history and achievements.

These days Women's History Month celebrations are mainstream. I'm hoping such celebrations haven't become so mundane that they are overlooked. It's important to recognize and celebrate the contributions that women have made—contributions that often have been overlooked or downplayed through the years. Women of the ELCA is set to observe the 25th anniversary of its creation, and participants should be especially aware of Lutheran women who have paved the way. With the rights and freedoms we enjoy, it's all too easy to ignore the struggles that our foremothers endured.

So how can you observe Women's History Month this year in a way that helps prepare for our year long 25th anniversary observance that begins in June? Here are a few ideas to get you started.

Use the month to collect the stories of women in your congregation and then plan to publish their stories as part of your anniversary celebration. Ask them to recall women's roles in the congregation and church during their lifetimes. How have they changed? Ask if they were involved in the women's movement in the 1960s and 1970s. How did that involvement influence their faith journey? If you record their stories, consider

creating podcasts or videos to share, maybe even creating a composite that could be a kickoff to the 25th anniversary year.

Record the dreams and hopes of teens and young women in your congregation, honoring their aspirations. Invite younger and older women alike to imagine what the next 25th years of Women of the ELCA will include. Pair up those young women with older women, offering mentoring opportunities. Together older and younger women can live out the purpose of Women of the ELCA in supporting "one another in our callings."

Select a book to read or video to watch and follow it with a discussion. You might consider the memoir *Mighty Be Our Powers* by Leymah Gbowee, a featured speaker at our triennial gathering last summer who received the Nobel Peace Prize this past October. Upon reading Gbowee's book, churchwide executive board member Phyllis Rude of Anchorage, Alaska, remarked, "her book makes me ask myself 'What more can I do besides talk and pray about problems I see around me?'" Use that question to frame a kickoff to the 25th anniversary year where each woman makes a commitment to move beyond talk and prayer into action. Plan ways that you can inspire and encourage one another throughout the year.

We're going to have a great celebration of Women of the ELCA's first 25 years. Plan now to take an active role in that celebration. ☺

Linda Post Bushkofsky is executive director of Women of the ELCA.



AMEN!

Too Much of a Good Thing

by Catherine Malotky

Imagine hearing how the people in the Mark 11 crowd addressed Jesus:

"Jesus, you argued with the religious authorities. As a follower, that feels pretty powerful to me: someone going to bat for the rest of us, bringing those religious elites down to size. I mean, some of us have to earn a living. We can't hang around the temple all day and get a PhD in the law, like some of those guys. Loved how you flipped those tables. And did you notice how nervous they got? You moved the dial, Jesus! More! Let's keep this little revolution going!"

OK, I'm projecting, God. There is something energizing about this story because all of us can feel besieged by the rigidity in the institutions around us. The truth is that every institution, even the church, is about preserving itself. Institutions repeat what worked in the past as a way of claiming the future. The problem is that the future is never the same as the past so what worked yesterday may not work today or tomorrow.

Every age has its own challenges. In Jesus' day, those religious authorities were trying very hard to sustain a synagogue in the midst of an occupying power. Their gods were different and their practices were different. It was actually amazing that the synagogues were still around.

But what Jesus sniffed out was that the religious authorities of his day had become overly identified with doing things right. It was too much of a good

thing—which means it had become an idolatrous thing—this keeping the law.

If we are honest, we know that you don't have to be someone regarded as a religious authority to suddenly find yourself acting as one. When we claim to know the bottom line, when we claim to have clear sight on God's will, we are drifting into the same territory. It can be tempting to get down on people who are trying to lead, but we forget too easily that each of us is a leader in the church, whether it's in our circle of family and friends, our congregation, our civic communities, or the global gathering.

Jesus flipped those tables to remind us that God is so much bigger than we can imagine. We will build our personal spiritual practices and the structures that organize our faith communities, but we have to be prepared to have the tables flipped because God always can surprise more than we can. Our future is always different than our past.

God, the beauty and wonder of you is your timeless flexibility. You revealed yourself to us in Jesus, who tenderly held children and impatiently confronted our tendency to want to nail you down. He took those nails into his own hands. He died because of that tendency. But you raised him up again, and in him we see your transforming love. Good and gracious God, thank you for calling us again and again to love. Amen.

The Rev. Catherine Malotky, an ELCA pastor, serves at Luther Seminary as a philanthropy adviser. She has served as a parish pastor, editor, teacher, and retreat leader.

SCHOOL KIT BAG LADY

Schroeder, a dedicated quilter at St. John's Lutheran Church, Helena, Mont., used her seamstress skills to sewing backpack-style bags for the Lutheran World Relief School Kits. For the past seven years, the Women of St. John's unit asked all congregation members to contribute the school supplies while some women sewed the bags. For the 2012 drive, volunteered to sew all the backpacks singlehandedly produced an amazing quantity of bags: 201! These bags are being filled with school supplies to help children continue learning despite the hardships they face.

—Submitted by Mait Board



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